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NUDITY IN THE PUBLIC EYE



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THE VISIBLE NUDE

by Ellen B. Cutler

Sculptural ornament is the traditional remedy to the emptiness of plazas and parklands. Monuments honor great achievements and mourn shared losses. A vocabulary of symbols and expressive gestures accrued over centuries provide artists with a rich resource of forms, and members of the public with ways to understand messages encoded in stone and bronze. Among the most common of motifs has been the nude figure.

At least this was the case prior to much of the twentieth century. It is now the twenty-first century, however, and “the public,” it seems, casts a harsher light on the nude. Are recent controversies based in regional attitudes that many describe as “provincial”? Or is there a fundamental change in the perception of the human form that has subverted our understanding of the nude and undermined its potential for metaphor?

In an effort to consider the outlook for the nude as a motif in contemporary public sculpture, *Sculpture Review* polled several artists and fabricators about their experiences and their expectations.

When asked whether they perceived a continued interest in the nude as a feature of public sculpture, there was no clear consensus. Denny Haskew of Loveland, Colorado, whose 1990 work *Moulding Our Future* caused controversy in his hometown, perceives an ongoing interest in the nude but also a “steady resistance from conservative religious thinkers.”¹ Paige Bradley, an American currently living and working in London, England, was more pessimistic. She pointed out that “More and more we have to cater to the public who view a work.” English artist Joanna Mallin-Davies, a member of the Royal British Society of Sculptors, referred to a contemporary taste for abstract form, saying, “There is a trend away from figurative art in public altogether, preferring the perceived to be ‘less risky’ ‘shapes’; or worse, simply lighting instead of sculpture.” Carol Mayer of the American Bronze Fine Art Foundry in Sanford, Florida, however, says that the firm has witnessed a decline in public sculpture projects that involve

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the nude. There are no commissions underway at this time, although they handled seven such jobs between 2002 and 2007. She sees a public response that focuses on propriety, saying, “Here in the South... there are an abundance of conservatives who would not want to see a realistic nude in a public place...[A]bstraction nullifies the “sexual” aspect of the figures...Here at our foundry we cast a great many tabletop-sized nudes, which seems to reflect the preference for placement in more personal and intimate settings, art galleries, or museums.”





Opposite: Warrior I by Joanna Mallin-Davies (2000), bronze, 16 feet high (including base), Brockhall Village Estate, Lancashire, Northern England.

On this page: Laying Low by Bruce Denny (2007), bronze, 53 inches high, HSBC Private Bank in London, England.



On this page, top left: The Graces by Joanna Mallin-Davies (2006), bronze, 40 inches high, Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

On this page, top right: Balance by Paige Bradley (2005), bronze, 84 inches high, Devendorf Park, Carmel, CA.

On this page, bottom: Expansion by Paige Bradley (2005), bronze, 76 inches high, Brooklyn, NY.



There was general agreement that Europeans and, particularly, those living on the Continent were more accepting of the nude in contemporary public sculpture. Bruce Garner, the sole Canadian interviewed, described attitudes in his country as “conservative” when it comes to the nude; his wife and partner, Tamaya, underscored that with a vigorous “very conservative.”² There was also a sense that familiarity breeds acceptance. Monuments from various eras that include nudes are a common feature in Europe’s cities and towns. The prominence of nudes in religious art may contribute to an atmosphere of appreciation as well.

One question posed to the artists focused on the significance of private versus public patronage. In the questionnaire, “public sculpture” was defined as “work intended for installation in public areas such as (but not limited to) public parks, town squares, entries/atriums to businesses and government buildings, and churches or religious institutions.” While work placed in such high-traffic areas can be controversial, regardless of ownership, the response to sculpture paid for wholly or in part by public funds can be more heated because of a popular sense that taxpayers covered the costs. For this reason, the author also contacted the General Services Administration (GSA), the agency charged with the commission and care of federally funded artworks in the United States, as well as the Commemorations and Public Art Programs of the National Capital Commission (NCC) in Canada. She asked whether artists were required to observe general standards, particularly in reference to nudity. The response from the GSA’s Public Affairs office stated, “We do not provide standards to artists nor have we proscribed nudity to any artist.”³ Janet McGowan

of the NCC also stated that her agency has no criteria that disallow nude figures in public art commissions, and provided guidelines for two recent commissions to illustrate their approach to public artworks.⁴ Of the eighty-one objects illustrated in Ottawa’s streetsmART brochure, however, only one involved nudes: Bruce Garner’s *Joy* (1970), which features four abstracted figures happily circling in dance.

Survey results show that public pieces featuring nudes were in fact almost always privately funded. Several artists indicated the importance of private patronage. Mallin-Davies writes, “I think private patronage can only have a good impact on public art.” She points to “risk” as a key aspect of artistic vision, and sees the willingness to take risk as antithetical to the approach of Church and State. British sculptor Bruce Denny is somewhat more sanguine: “It is an unfortunate real-



ity that private patrons dictate what constitutes 'good' art...I am hopeful that we are experiencing a resurgence in figurative art, and I would like to see more high-profile private patrons celebrating this." Paige Bradley says, "I have a private patron who is moved by the human figure...He has purchased the work and has hired a consultant to find the right venue. His only rule: that many people must see it every single day...He believe[s] this will awaken and inspire people...to [appreciate] figurative art again." The Garners identified "the committee" as the main obstacle in the design of a public sculpture in any style. Reminding the author that a camel is a horse designed by a committee, Bruce Garner said that he has forsaken government-sponsored competitions, preferring private commissions for clients who admire his artistic vision and desire the unique object that will result.

The comments of these artists and foundries suggest the following:


Nudes seem more likely to generate controversy when they are either (or both) male or realistic. While this sensitivity is not recent—to wit the use of fig leaves and bits of drapery in art of the past—it is more pronounced in contemporary art. This may be due in part to the positioning of sexuality at the center of contemporary behaviors and assumptions.

The modernist dedication to abstraction poses a twofold challenge to the nude in public sculpture. On the one hand, nonrepresentational forms are regarded as aesthetically advanced and emblematic of art that is both expressive of its time and universal in its appeal to multicultural societies. On the other hand, abstraction is also used to idealize figurative sculpture or enrich its expressive effect while disengaging it from a specific historic moment or ethnic identity.

Joseph Sheppard summarized attitudes about the nude this way: "The point is really one about realism versus abstraction, stylization versus naturalism, old-world Catholicism versus New World evangelism."⁵ However one articulates it,

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responses to nudes in contemporary public sculpture are rooted in a complex terrain of social and religious attitudes as well as changing aesthetic tastes. It would also seem that the bedrock of this terrain is less about an educated and classical understanding of the meaning of

the nude throughout art history than the appearance or implication of sexuality that the nude holds for contemporary Western societies. 

NOTES:

1. All quotations unless otherwise noted are taken from written responses to the *Sculpture Review* questionnaire.
2. Telephone conversation with Bruce and Tamaya Garner, Wednesday, May 7, 2008.
3. E-mail from Maryanne Beatty, dated Tuesday, April 22, 2008.
4. E-mail from Janet McGowan, coordinator, Commemorations and Public Art Programs, National Capital Commission, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Ms. McGowan's e-mail also included a .pdf attachment of *streetsmART*, a NCC brochure identifying works of public art in Canada's Capital Region.
5. Telephone conversation with Joseph Sheppard, Thursday, April 17, 2008.

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On this page, left: *Introspection* by Bruce Denny (2007), bronze, HSBC Private Bank in London, England.